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The Rural Transition in Romania

This paper discusses changes in Romanian agriculture, as the fundamental component in the rural transition, with particular reference to contrasts between the Carpathians and Lowland areas revealed through investigations carried out in recent years in the tradition of Romanian social survey [15]. Romanian rural affairs have not been nearly so well discussed in the West as those for other post-socialist countries of Central Europe — a region in which Romanian intellectuals always insist their country belongs. Yet rural issues are quite central to the transition because, according to the 1992 census, 10.39 million people (45.6% of the total population), still live in the countryside. In contrast to the counter urbanising trends in Western Europe, and 'de-agrarisation' noted in some parts of Eastern Europe — almost every permanent rural dweller in Romania is involved in agriculture and virtually all the residual labour is soaked up by farm work [27]. Of course, there is also heavy dependence on income from non-agricultural sources. In the Lowlands, there are local industries in the rural areas concerned with engineering (including repairs and maintenance), food processing and textiles. Daily and weekly commuting to jobs in the towns is still widespread despite increasing unemployment. In the mountains, the towns are generally less accessible but there are often employment opportunities near at hand in tourism, mining and woodcutting.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

When the revolution occurred, an optimist looking for rapid transition to Western European conditions might have presumed that, in addition to the restitution in agricultural land, there would be privatisation of non-agricultural enterprises and a considerable growth of new business on the basis of emigré capital and return migration of Romanian workers from the towns [24]. On this basis, private enterprise would blossom after decades of under investment, the rural areas would be corrected. On the other hand, a

pessimistic assessment might anticipate the relative backwardness of rural conditions being reinforced by capital shortage and a decline of commercial activity. At the same time, the peasantry might be radicalised by an inadequate land restitution programme and resistance to change among the local bureaucracies. In fact, land restitution has taken place, although the delay in issuing definitive titles has frustrated the emergence of a land market. Moreover, marketing problems and capital shortages prevent growth. There has been some new business in the villages — concerned with agricultural contracting and an increase in the provision of shops, bars and restaurants — supported by modest increases in farm incomes. But many families are hard pressed to supplement the proceeds from farming with a regular income from non-agricultural occupations [9]. There has been limited foreign investment in rural areas — often determined by emigré links with certain villages — but the distribution is highly uneven and while some areas, like the rural fringes of Bucharest and Timișoara, have done very well, there are large parts of rural Moldavia that have gained virtually nothing [22].

Stagnation has, at times, been pervasive, for Romanian society seems to have 'relapsed into a political apathy' [18, p. 126]. From studies of civil society by both Romanian and Western authors [3, 11], it emerges that a sense of malaise is finding an outlet in nationalism, which has negative implications for inter-ethnic relations. In Transylvania, increasing unemployment among Romanian migrants from Moldavia has been complicated by perceived discrimination by Hungarians reclaiming historic vested interests, the disturbances reported in Tîrgu Mureș in 1991 [16]. In the case of the rural areas, an early renaissance in 'grass roots' activity was neutralised by the emerging hierarchy of the National Salvation Front — now the party of Social Democracy [10]. The loss of casual jobs on the agricultural co-operatives has caused particular difficulty for Gypsies who have now gravitated in increasing numbers to the edge of cities where violence has occasionally broken out. The Gypsy deaths at Hadareni near the town of Ludus in Central Transylvania are a case in point [4]. Fortunately, violence is extremely rare and it is unlikely that Romania will go the 'Balkan way'; yet social scientists are now extending the geographers' notions of instability — related to earthquakes, floods and landslides — to the socio-economic plane [2].

Population trends show somewhat contradictory trends in the balance between urban and rural sectors (table 1). However, the data involves a mixture of census results and estimates and the whole picture is complicated by emigration which has involved ethnic Romanians as well as Germans, Gypsies and Hungarians. Comparison of estimates for 1989 and 1992 suggests continuing migration from rural areas — allowing for the natural decrease of -1.0 per thousand in 1991 and -1.9 in 1992; following the nat-

Table 1

Urban and Rural Population ('000s) 1977–92

	Total	Urban	Rural	% Rural
1977 census	21,559.9	9,305.7	12,164.2	56.4
1989 mid year estimate	23,151.6	12,311.8	10,839.8	46.8
1990 mid year estimate	23,206.7	12,608.8	10,597.9	45.7
1991 mid year estimate	23,185.1	12,552.4	10,632.7	45.9
1992 census	22,760.0	12,372.8	10,387.7	45.6
1992 mid year estimate	22,789.0	12,367.4	10,421.6	45.7

Source: Romanian Statistical Annuals

ural increase of 3.9 in 1989 and 0.9 in 1990. There would appear to have been growth between 1990 and 1991 and again in 1992 between the census at the beginning of the year and mid-year estimate. But in the latter case it is doubtful if the growth of 33.9 thousands reflects any real expansion in economic activity. A growth of 29.4 thousands occurred in Moldavia, where unemployment rates are high; along with 15.8 in Central Wallachia and 11.6 in northern and eastern parts of Transylvania. By contrast, the more economically dynamic regions saw a decline in the rural population: Bucharest and the South East lost 15.1 thousands, Banat 5.1 and Central Transylvania 2.7. Information collected in the Buzau Subcarpathians show overall decline arising from both natural decrease and net out-migration to cities such as Braşov, Buzău and Ploeşti as well as the capital city, Bucharest (table 2).

AGRICULTURE

Out migration is still continuing despite land restitution and problematic employment situation in the towns. Although the land reform — providing up to ten hectares of land—arable equivalent — for former landowners — was both a social necessity and a political expedient, to convert a disgruntled peasantry into a conservative force [23], initial euphoria has been followed by a reduction in the level of intensification which has affected both cropping and livestock. It has been suggested that both the land and human resources were exhausted after half a century of central planning and under investment; particularly during the last decade of Communist rule when farming was pressed to unsustainable levels of intensification in

Table 2

Demographic data for the Buzău Subcarpathian Study area

Milieu	Year	Population*	Natural increase			
			A	B	C	D
Urban	1986	11900	210	128	+82	+6.9
	1990	12367	180	133	+47	+3.8
	1991	12264	171	141	+30	+2.4
	1992	12187	137	125	+12	+1.0
	1993	12267	122	121	+1	+0.1
		Migration:				
	1986		35	90	-55	-4.6
	1990		109	259	-150	-12.1
	1991		30	137	-107	-8.7
	1992		215	157	+68	+5.6
1993		298	100	+198	+16.1	
Rural	1986	90000	1397	1150	+247	+2.7
	1990	86810	1252	1095	+157	+1.8
	1991	83405	1081	1194	-113	-1.4
	1992	82260	1110	1172	-62	-0.8
	1993	81364	1054	1150	-96	-1.2
		Migration:				
	1986		310	975	-665	-7.4
	1990		602	4164	-3562	-41.0
	1991		504	1536	-1032	-12.4
	1992		821	1655	-834	-10.1
1993		737	1469	-732	-9.0	

*January estimates

A - Births/Arrivals; B - Deaths/Departures; C - Balance D - Rate per thousand;

Source: Commune Statistical Files, National Commission for Statistics

order to export and pay off foreign debts. Since much of the production was of low quality, especially in the livestock sector, there is arguably a need for respite on both economic and ecological grounds.

However, there are other problems affecting the transition which may well be more significant. Firstly, structural change disrupted many existing production systems and sometimes left large livestock rearing units without a fodder supply and some animals were illegally exported. Irrigation systems — previously dependent on co-operation between groups of co-

-operative and state farms. — became unworkable. There were also transitional problems over the redeployment of machinery and the usable stock of equipment has been considerably reduced. Secondly, the former state distribution system was badly undermined and alternative private arrangements — using car boots and trailers at a time of rising energy costs — make for substantial variations in commodity prices on urban markets across the country. Peasants often experience difficulty in disposing of small surpluses unless they are able to visit local food markets personally. Thirdly, given the possibility of importing food — sugar for example, the prices offered to Romanian farmers by the food processors are often unattractive, especially when the effort of delivery by cart is accounted for. Finally, since loans are expensive, investment in farming is not attractive and, usually, intensification can only be extended as far as the family labour supply allows. There has been a delay in providing machines suitable for small farms at affordable prices. Foreign companies with their own infrastructure may well take a different view and some projects are under way, for example, at Naipu near Bucharest.

Although the land is fundamental, farmers tend to produce their own food as far as possible and in effect withdraw from the national economy. They concentrate their production for the market on cereals and livestock for which a state marketing system is retained; with some competition from local meat processors. There has been a sharp decline in output since 1989 and some perishable products are in short supply on urban markets. The fresh milk supply is inadequate, partly because peasants prefer to make cheese which is less perishable and more valuable. Young people are generally disinterested in small scale mixed farming, especially when they cannot take overall responsibility, and they tend to seek employment outside the village in the manufacturing and tertiary sector — with particular attachment to government service. They tend to leave home permanently if such opportunities are not available in the immediate locality.

Maize production has not been greatly affected because it is a basic subsistence crop but wheat production fell from 7.94 million tones in 1989 to 3.23 million in 1992 and the sugar beet harvest also declined steeply from 6.77 million to 2.90 million tones during the same period. The cattle herd declined from 6.3 to 3.7 million head, though the number of pigs declined less steeply from 11.7 to 9.9 million. Farmers could not afford the higher prices for the chemical fertiliser and application was reduced from 1.16 to 0.42 million tones — active substance — between 1989 and 1992. The decline in intensification can also be seen in terms of land use. Although agricultural land has increased, this is due to larger areas of pastureland, conventionally divided between hill pasture and the more valuable hay meadows. Arable land has declined by just over 100,000 hectares while

Table 3

Romania: land use change ('000 hectares) 1989–1992

	1989	1992	Change
Arable	9458.4	9356.9	-101.5
Pastures	3256.9	3349.2	+93.3
Hayfields	1448.3	1480.6	+32.3
Vineyards	277.5	298.6	+21.1
Orchards/Vegetable Gardens	318.0	304.8	-13.2
Agricultural Land	14759.0	14790.1	+31.1
Forest	6678.5	6681.8	+3.3
Other	2401.6	2367.2	-34.4
Total	23839.1	23839.1	0.0

Source: Romanian Statistical Annuals

an increase in the area of vineyards is balanced by a reduction in orchards and vegetable gardens (see table 3). There are spatial variations in the picture because 55.5 thousand hectares of arable land have been lost in Transylvania while the nine counties of the South East (Brăila, Călărași, Constanța, Galați, Giurgiu, Ialomița, Ilfov, Tulcea and Vrancea) have actually increased their arable area by 4.3 thousand hectares. This could indicate a trend towards specialisation, which is borne out to some extent by information on the value of production, discriminating between crops and livestock.

Agriculture as a whole has become more basic, with an increased share of the total value of production for crops: 54.4% in 1989 and 58.0% in 1992, against a historic trend in Romania which has seen cropping reduce its share from 69.7% in 1938 to 65.1 in 1950, 62.3 in 1970 and 55.4% in 1980. Paradoxically however, specialisation is being retained and, in some ways, accentuated. Transylvania was 3.5 percentage points below the national level for crops in 1989, showing a significant bias to the livestock sector, but 4.4% in 1992. Meanwhile, the figures for the South East show a strong bias towards crops: 7.6 and 7.0 percentage points above the national average. However, the specialisation takes place in the context of reduced levels of intensification. In the four counties of West Transylvania (Arad, Bihor, Caraș-Severin and Timiș), the deviation below the national average for crops increased sharply to 6.0 percentage points in 1992 from only 0.5 in

1989, but this has to be seen in the context of a reduced contribution to agricultural production as a whole (13.5% in 1989 and 12.1 in 1992), including some percentage reductions in the numbers of animals greater than those that have occurred nationally: marginally for cattle (at -41.7% compared with -41.4 nationally) but more significant for pigs (-31.6 compared with -15.6), sheep and goats (30.0 compared with -21.7); and poultry (-29.8 compared with -23.0).

The decrease in output arises in part from inadequate technical support. In addition to deficiencies in irrigation systems, there has been a decline in the machinery available and the numbers of tractors declined from 151.7 thousands in 1989 to 146.8 in 1992 — a reduction of 3.3%. However, the distribution of tractors changed because the number of tractors in Transylvania — a major livestock rearing region — increased during this period by 9.4% from 50.6 to 55.4 thousands, while in the South East, the major cereal growing area, the number declined by 16.3% — from 43.7 to 36.5 thousands. This may be suggestive of higher investment in Transylvania and reduced labour inputs in a region where labour is known to be relatively expensive and from where emigration has been relatively high in recent years, particularly in the four counties of West Transylvania already referred to.

LOWLAND AND CARPATHIANS ENVIRONMENTS

There also appear to be substantial differences in agricultural organisation between Lowland and Carpathians regions. The co-operatives have survived in the Lowlands as associations, although there is much competition between rival organisations within individual villages when the financial returns are considered in the light of fertiliser inputs and other management decisions [1]. Of course, small scale farming may not be conducive to efficient use of machinery, but the modest interest in independent farming derives in part from the dispersal of families and the arrival in Lowland villages of many people who have no historic claims to land in the area. Many beneficiaries of land reform in the Lowlands are urban dwellers who are only too happy to make arrangements with an association so that their land can be looked after without the need to negotiate more informal sharecropping arrangements. By contrast, in the Carpathians there has been a powerful reaction against the co-operatives and unilateral action often took place to re-establish the pre-Communist cadaster in advance of legislation. Where machinery is needed, small plots do not necessarily constrain the use of combine harvesters. Former co-operative farm buildings have often fallen derelict and many have been demolished despite the fact that they represent a major investment during the Communist era [5].

The attitude of Carpathians farmers reflects a keen interest in land ownership, with an insistence on the recovery of exactly the same plots — often highly fragmented — owned by the families concerned before the Communist revolution [3]. The government was astute enough to frame its land reform so that the great majority of these land seizures could be legalised — bearing in mind that the upper limit of ten hectares is 'arable equivalent'. At the same time, this limit has been set low enough to allow large numbers of households to benefit and also to provide symbolic holdings of 0.5 — 1.0 hectares to all rural dwellers — as promised in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 revolution. Even so, half of the 534.4 thousand farm workers — that is, people working for salaries on the state farms, which have not yet broken up — have not received their full entitlement. Finally, the land reform ensures support for the government against opposition proposals for more generous restitution that could benefit large landowners whose claims might conflict with those of the peasantry.

However, the reappearance of small farms in the Romanian Carpathians is not simply a matter of sentiment. Farmers are carefully considering their options in the light of indifferent marketing conditions. Capital investment is not attractive, apart from the purchase of small items of equipment such as circular saws and milling machines powered by electricity. But intensification may be extended in sympathy with available labour. Largely irrespective of local conditions, family strategies tend to reflect age structure. In a mountain situation, where the emphasis is traditionally on livestock rearing, young people usually make every effort to find a job outside agriculture; even where this involves long periods of absence from the farm — traditionally the case in Maramures. Wives will run the farm and much of the crop land may be used for hay. People in middle age will tend to be more active in agriculture, fully exploiting the potential of the smallholding, producing crops even on the more outlying strips and making full use of outlying farmsteads — characteristic of the Subcarpathians areas of Buzău and Vrancea — despite the social costs arising through absence from the main family home during the growing season. Farm work may be complemented by casual work or farm diversification. Older people struggle to manage their farm, depending upon informal local arrangements and occasional visits from their children.

Divergent trends may be noticed with regard to the accessibility of agricultural land. On the whole, the level of intensification has declined in 'core areas' that were very fully used by the former co-operatives. Under Communism, intensive use was made of such areas for fruit growing and viticulture (also vegetable growing) in the context of a mixed farming system concentrating on livestock. Settlement tended to consolidate close to such areas through physical planning (*sistematizare*) to emphasise agrogoods which benefited from selective improvements to the infrastruc-

ture and some promotion of rural settlements to urban status. However, restitution has often resulted in a decrease of intensification — sometimes leading to the destruction of orchards — where current market prices will not support the inputs required and where the demands of the livestock sector — supported by a more reliable marketing system — require more maize cultivation. Meanwhile, the abandonment of 'sistematzare' has halted the process of settlement consolidation [24].

By contrast, there has been some increase in effort in 'peripheral areas' that tended to be marginalised under Communism [14] because of the cost of deploying teams of workers. Activity in some hilly areas was maintained largely by individual peasants collecting fodder for their own animals. This was marked by a decline of interest in secondary farmsteads — traditionally occupied on a seasonal basis — and the invasion of grazings by a 'catina', a scrub vegetarian. Some farm land was converted to forest. Outlying villages lacking their own co-operative farm sections were scheduled to destruction under the 'sistematzare' programme. No villages were actually lost in the mountains prior to the revolution but the local services declined due to the deterioration of local roads and the closure of some small schools. However, under the transition the restitution of farmland has increased interest in agriculture leading to some scrub clearance and increasing activity in collecting fodder. Restitution claims also threaten some woodlands established on land previously farmed. There are some ecological risks inherent in these developments [12] and in some areas, agriculture is subject to constraints on the grounds of sustainability [6]. However, small, outlying rural settlements now face a more secure future, although services remain very poor and communities are relatively elderly. People previously resettled in central villages use their former homes as secondary farmsteads as bases for the collection of fruit and hay.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Higher production clearly depends on greater efficiency and prospects of profitability that will encourage investment [7]. But, a big improvement in infrastructure is also needed — with the present relatively large scale organisation of Lowland farming merely one of the preconditions [20]. Much better links with the food processors, an improved technical base and further research to establish the parameters for a ecologically sustainable agriculture are all discussed in the economic press, including weeklies such as 'Tribuna Economica'. Farms need to gear themselves more exclusively towards the market, yet reduced priority for food supply to peasant households depends on better food distribution — making the purchase of foodstuffs more efficient — and on better non-agricultural employment

prospects in order to provide the necessary money and further discourage a labour intensive subsistence approach.

In the Carpathians, farm diversification may offer a way forward in Romania and in other mountain regions of post Communist Central Europe. The economic press has made much of the potential for farm based tourism [21], although diversification involves many other types of business, including food processing and handicrafts. Progress has so far been restrained, although there are some notable instances of emigré capital being channelled into rural Carpathians locations through family and professional contacts. The indigenous development of local industries has been significant where there are few capital demands — e.g. the refurbishment of water mills which can be undertaken by local craftsmen. And in these respects, there is a degree of continuity arising through the flexibility shown by some local authorities prior to the revolution, particularly in Maramures. However, despite the present Vacaroiu governments desire to extend agricultural credit, there is nothing to suggest that the peasant farmers will be generously assisted. Economic policy may be influenced more heavily by the vested interests linked with the state farms. It is possible that large 'nomenklatura' farms could expand through land purchase — once the distribution of definitive titles is completed, and provide a more viable base for capital investment. The present farming population would therefore transfer to the secondary and tertiary sectors, as the younger members of peasant households are seeking to do so at present.

The present opposition (Democratic Convention) might well support loans to small farms on account of the traditional orientation of the National Peasant Party which is one of the major elements in the coalition. However, the Convention is widely regarded as unelectable because of its internal divisions and its advocacy of an enterprise culture which is largely alien to both peasant farmers and the workers in the state-owned industries.

However, diversified peasant farms might, in theory, evolve into kinship or neighbourhood groups. This would follow the thinking of R. Rey, outlined during the Communist era as an alternative to the more uncompromising consolidation envisaged under the prevailing 'sistemizare' policy [17]. However, Rey's success in the creation of the Agriculture Ministry's 'Commission for Mountainous Regions' has not yet extended to generous funding for a comprehensive programme of 'mountainology' that would improve agriculture and encourage pluriactivity. Despite the impressive elaboration of the Commission's aims in the newspaper 'Viata Muntilor' most peasants remain unaware of its existence [25].

It is difficult to see how a further decline in the rural population and an acceleration of rural-urban migration can be avoided, although the extent could vary according to the optimum farm structure. Further migration would certainly be feasible given the modest size of most provincial towns

like Campulung and Lugoj which lost their status as a result of reorganisation of local government under Communism. This would provide more 'gateway cities' to support regional development in Romania [8]. However, certain aspects of the late President Ceausescu's 'sistemizare' may still be appropriate. For, in addition to the proposed bulldozing of thousands of villages, it was envisaged that 300–400 rural settlements would be promoted to urban status. In this way, the centres of districts comprising groups of co-operative and state farms — set up for the planning of agricultural production in the 1980s — were to acquire functions in administration, services and local industry, including food processing. Little progress was made with the implementation of this programme, so the urban network still remains deficient in many areas and there remain many historic 'lands' without an urban centre [19]. The latest generation of county plans include some possibilities, with proposed local centres (currently villages) for Bihor county at Poets, Sambata, Tinca and Vadu Crisului to provide the base of urban hierarchy [26]. Therefore, in spatial terms the modification of the settlement pattern, to create additional local markets, could be a significant element in a scenario for change; although the towns would be backed by the traditional rural settlement system rather than the greatly attenuated structure envisaged under Communist planning.

CONCLUSION

Romanian agriculture has experienced a reduction in intensification with the opening up to world market competition and until there is an improvement in the market and in the efficiency of the distribution system, investment at commercial interest rates will not take place. There are some indications of greater specialisation and a fairly clear difference of approach between Lowland and Carpathians environments. Agricultural machinery suitable for small farms is becoming more widely available and some communes are developing external links as a means of gaining access to additional expertise and other forms of assistance. But rural incomes are low and diversification is needed, although capital resources are totally inadequate. Meanwhile, young people continue to leave the countryside and this further reduces the human resources for effective leadership. Given the present political climate it is difficult to be optimistic about the immediate prospects for rural development. But there are some positive signs such as the growth of rural tourism along the Bran–Rucar corridor and it may be from such growth points that rural enterprise will spread.

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